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What's New in Children's Literature? Engaging Readers through Series Books

Barbara A. Ward & Terrell A. Young

Abstract

Although experts may debate the literary value of series books and bemoan readers' reluctance to move away from familiar characters and settings, the fact remains that they often draw reluctant readers to the printed word. There is no evidence that reading series books ruins the literary health or moral fiber of readers (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). In fact, the opposite may happen since series books often promotes reading in reluctant readers. Time spent searching for something to read can be shortened, and long hours can be filled profitably with series reading since readers already know the types of books for which they're searching. If readers find the character at the heart of a series book to be interesting enough, they'll stick with that character as he/she grows or experiences all sorts of adventures, some likely, some not so likely. Some readers find themselves maturing alongside the characters who have become their friends on the printed pages, and use their behavior as models for their own.

Series books provide a sense of normality and security to readers since they are familiar and predictable, and the characters rarely surprise them. They take comfort from the clear storyline and the assurance that any problems that arise will be resolved in a satisfactory way. Readers know that any loose ends will be tied up in the next book in the series, and so they read on and on, intrigued by the literary family they've discovered. If our purpose is to promote engagement with books, then series books clearly provide one avenue to engagement.

For this issue's column on books, we thought it would be informative to take a look at some of the popular series books whose most recent volumes were published in 2006 or 2007. After all, July marked the arrival of the final installment of one of the most popular series ever published when J. K. Rowling took us Muggles back into the magical world of Hogwarts with its delightful cast of witches and wizards in the immensely satisfying *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). The seventh title in the fantasy series that began a decade ago with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997) is filled with literary delights and lessons about the choices that humans make, and the constant reminder that even evil individuals are capable of acts of kindness.

Nonfiction also gets on the series bandwagon with three excellent series: *Insiders*, a terrific new science series; the *Outside and Inside* science series filled with intriguing science and suppositions about topics of interest to young readers; and *Up Close*, a collection of fascinating biographies featuring compelling stories and intriguing individuals, some of whom seem to have written the sound track of our lives.

Younger Readers K-3

The *Zelda and Ivy* series offers beginning chapter books to young readers. In the latest installment, *Zelda and Ivy: The Runaways* (Kvasnosky, 2007), readers have three short chapter/stories. The first is about how the spirited fox sisters "run away" from home in their backyard to avoid another lunch of cucumber sandwiches. In the second, they decide to create a time capsule and bury some of their most prized possessions only to discover they are not ready to part with their treasures. Finally, the third story involves Ivy's creation of a magic potion to enable Zelda to overcome her writers' block to create a poem. Children relate to the foxes' sibling rivalry, the clever text, and humorous illustrations. The American Library Association awarded this book with the Theodore Seuss Geisel Beginning Reader Medal.

Kate DiCamillo's *Mercy Watson* chapter book series provides first through third grade readers with rollicking reading adventures. *Mercy*, the "porcine wonder," is the Watsons' beloved pet pig who loves hot buttered toast. The most recent book, *Mercy Watson: Princess in Disguise* (2007), a delightful Halloween story in which *Mercy* is dressed as a princess complete with a tiara,

offers young readers lots of tricks, treats, and humor. *Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride* (2006) was recognized by the American Library Association as a Theodore Seuss Geisel Beginning Reader Honor Book.

Second grader Goonie Bird Greene takes Watertower Elementary School by storm, and things will never be the same for her classmates. What's not to love with a heroine who is a natural storyteller, has an enormous vocabulary and enjoys dressing her own way? She tells "absolutely true" stories in the first book in this series, *Goonie Bird Greene* (Lowry, 2004), and her classmates and even her teacher Mrs. Pidgeon, fall in love. In the most recent installment of the series, *Goonie the Fabulous* (2007), Goonie and her classmates are inspired to write their own fables. As usual, Goonie is the star, and Mrs. Pidgeon and the other children play supporting roles.

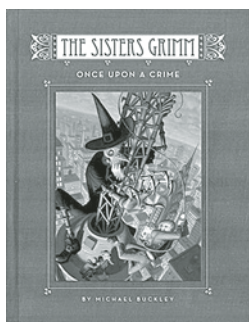
Third grader Clementine is almost always in trouble. She spends more time in the principal's office than in her classroom, and even at home, she finds trouble with her neighbor Margaret, whose house is far too neat and orderly for the shenanigans of free-spirited Clementine. Introduced in *Clementine* (Pennypacker, 2006), this unusual girl finds herself looking for a talent to display at the school talent show in *Clementine the Talented* (2007), an experience common to many readers. The newest book shows that even the self-confident Clementine can feel insecure in some respects, especially when faced with the multi-talented Margaret, who simply can't decide which of her many talents to display. Readers will side with Clementine as she tries to find a way out of public humiliation.

The inimitable Judy Moody is one of a kind, but in the latest saga *Judy Moody Around the World in 8½ Days* (McDonald, 2006), her equilibrium is threatened when she meets Amy Namey, another third grader with a rhyming name. When Amy and Judy become friends, her other friends are threatened and decide to boycott doing their part of the class Around the World project. The book has much to offer concerning teamwork.

Many children have grown up listening to the more than 20 books in the Max and Ruby series by Rosemary Wells. These books feature Max, a rambunctious, toddler bunny, and his seven-year-old big sister, Ruby. In *Max Counts His Chickens* (2007), the Easter Bunny hides ten pink marshmallow chicks for the two bunnies. Grandma must act quickly when Ruby finds them all. Children enjoy both the humor in Max's search and the counting opportunities this clever and wonderfully illustrated book provides.

Middle Grades Grades 4-6

Expected in early 2008, *Inkdeath*, Cornelia Funke's eagerly anticipated third title in the Inkheart series should answer readers' questions about its characters' fates in their fictional world. In the first book in this trilogy, *Inkheart* (2003), an evil character named Capricorn escapes from a book when Meggie's father, Silvertongue, reads aloud from it. In *Inkspell* (2005), Meggie and Farid, first introduced to readers in *Inkheart*, end up caught inside *Inkheart*, the book whose characters have come to life. Inside the book's world, they meet Fenoglio, the book's author, but the book he has written has been changed, and continues to change—in ways that threaten them and those they love. Things are looking grim at the end of *Inkspell*, and Dustfinger's fate hangs in the balance.



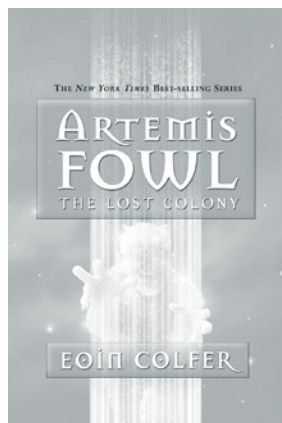
A delightful series that has its roots in familiar fairy tales and puts a new spin on familiar fairy tale characters, the four books in the Sisters Grimm collection follow the misadventures of siblings Sabrina and Daphne Grimm. In the first book *Fairy-tale Detectives* (Buckley, 2005), the bitter and decidedly unkind Ms. Smirt has brought the girls to the home of their grandmother Relda after their parents' disappearance and their stay in an orphanage. The girls are, by turns, shocked and intrigued by this unusual

household and its denizens, one of whom, Mr. Canis, seems to have more in common with wolves than humans. Their adventures continue in *The Unusual Suspects* (2005), *The Problem Child* (2006), and in *Once Upon a Crime* (2007). In the most recent publication the sisters venture to New York to solve a murder. While there, they learn a secret about their mother. The combination of fairy tale elements and the modern world leaves plenty of room for laughter and surprise in this quirky, compelling series.

Readers learn about art while having a high-flying adventure in *Chasing Vermeer* (Balliet, 2004). Chicago sixth graders Petra and Calder discover that they share a love for art, and when a painting by Vermeer is stolen, their bond grows stronger as they decide to recover the painting and reveal the thief. Using pentominos, a mysterious book, and their careful observations, they take the readers on a wild chase as they try to solve the mystery before it's too late and the thief destroys the painting. The second book, *The Wright 3* (2006), follows

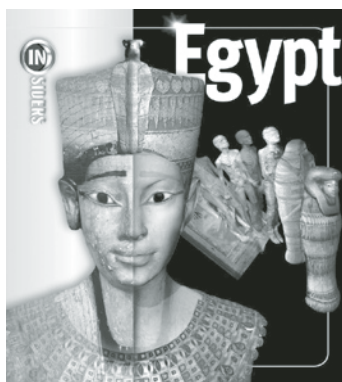
Petra, Calder, and their friend Tommy as they work to save Chicago's famous Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Robie House from being destroyed. There are twists and turns that keep readers reading, and mysteries to solve. Not only do readers find challenging puzzles, but they also get an insider's view of Chicago and its incredible architecture. Balliet's many fans are hoping for more puzzles for Petra, Calder, and Tommy.

Many children enjoy reading about the child-criminal mastermind, Artemis Fowl, in the fantasy series by the Irish author Eoin Colfer. In book five, *The Lost Colony* (2006), an ancient spell begins to unravel and has the potential to unleash hordes of demons onto the earth with the potential to destroy humankind. Artemis once again enlists the help of Captain Holly Short to prevent this demon colony from returning to the earth. We are also introduced to another juvenile genius whose efforts to capture a demon complicates Artemis's plans to keep the demons from the earth.



Sandra Markle's incredible *Outside and Inside Woolly Mammoths* (2007) is filled with amazing photographs and scientific suppositions about the demise of the woolly mammoth. Markle's text adds new luster to an already intriguing subject. Other books in the Outside/Inside series, *Mummies*, *Killer Bees*, and *Giant Squid* (2003), are equally engaging and sure to inspire "Oooh!"s and "Ahhhhh!"s from fascinated readers.

A stunning new nonfiction series, *Insiders*, offers both a visual and textual feast for readers in grades three through six. Each book addresses a spellbinding topic such as *Dinosaurs* (Long, 2007), *Egypt* (Tyldesley, 2007), *Oceans* (McMillan & Musick, 2007), and *Space* (Dyer, 2007) in engaging text that is both fascinating and current. The accompanying illustrations are dynamic computer-generated and 3-D images. The book, *Egypt* (2007), invites



readers to view many facets of ancient Egyptian civilization such as the inner-workings of pyramid building, the making of a mummy, and an inside look at King Tutankhamen's tomb.

Older Readers Grades 6 and Up

What if the great Sherlock Holmes had a younger sister who was every bit as clever as he was? That's the idea behind the delightful Enola Holmes series, which is set in Victorian London. Fourteen-year-old Enola Holmes is on the run from her older brothers Sherlock and Mycroft. Enola, introduced to readers in *The Case of the Missing Marquess* (Springer, 2006), is feisty, determined, and crafty. Detective work must run in the family since she displays her sibling's own adeptness in locating a teenage heiress who has disappeared in *The Case of the Left-Handed Lady* (2007). London's dangerous streets keep Enola on her toes as she travels along the same paths as her famous brother. Readers will delight in her quick thinking and facility with disguise and will wonder about her future moves as well as when her path will collide with her brother's. Independent Enola's adventures will continue in *The Case of the Bizarre Bouquets* (2008), and her fans simply cannot wait.

His name is Bond, James Bond, and we meet him in *Silver Fin* (Higson, 2005) at the age of 14 before he becomes a lady-killing spy. Living with his aunt and attending a private school, the young Bond endures the typical teasing from an arrogant, privileged classmate and discovers a bizarre genetic experiment in Scotland. The young Bond is better developed and more interesting in *Blood Fever* (2006), the second installment of the series. On a school trip with classmates, James finds villainy and piracy on the island of Sardinia as well as treachery among his teachers, one of whom belongs to a secret Italian society. The makings of the future 007 can be seen in James's determination and heroism, and the characters and the plot hold the readers' interest and bode well for the 2008 release of the next Young Bond adventure *Double or Die*.

In the most recent entry in the Alice series, *Dangerously Alice* (2007), author Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's beloved character is 16, and suffers the ignominy of being labeled a "Goody-Two Shoes" by her classmates as she faces several challenges familiar to teens, including whether to become sexually active.

Readers who have grown up with Alice since the first titles when she was a sixth grader on the edge of becoming a teen and the prequel *Starting with Alice* (2004) will relate strongly to Alice's dilemmas and care about the decisions she makes as she becomes involved with a much more experienced boyfriend. *Alice in Agony* (1985) was the first title in this series, and the twenty-third title, *Alice in the Know* (2007), is set to be released this fall. It's hard for readers not to love Alice because her adventures and struggles mirror those of many preteen and teen girls. Her very ordinariness guarantees that they'll crave more books about Alice and the choices she makes.

Readers met Darren Shan, an average boy with a taste for the macabre, and who sneaks into a magic show one night and subsequently has his life changed in the first book in *Cirque du Freak: A Living Nightmare* (2001) in this gory series gobbled up primarily by boys. By the time Darren struggles into book eleven of the series, he is part-vampire and has suffered unaccountable losses. The twelfth title in the series, to be released in the fall, pits Daren in a fight for the fate of his world. Although the most recent titles lack the intrigue and originality of the first few entries in this series, they continue to attract and keep their audience reading.

In one of the titles in the new Up Close biography series, *Up Close: Rachel Carson* (Levine, 2007), readers learn about the power of the written word and of a determined individual. A woman ahead of her time, Carson studied the earth's ecosystems and became concerned over the influence of pesticides on the environment. Burdened with many financial and family responsibilities, she was still able to write beautifully about the ocean and the physical world in a way that forced others to take notice and to care about their own actions. The author draws from Carson's journals and other writings to keep the reader's interest. Other Up Close titles worth reading include biographies of Johnny Cash, Robert Francis Kennedy, Elvis Presley, and Oprah Winfrey. All contain gritty, realistic accounts of the struggles and successes of these public figures. The publisher plans to release volumes featuring Ella Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and Frank Lloyd Wright as well.



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